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UNCLAS MUSCAT 001030

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PPD, NEA/P, IIP/G/NEA  
AMMAN FOR ESTH HUB - JWHITTLESEY

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SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: SHOOTINGS, SCIENCE, AND STATESMEN

REF: MUSCAT 1013

1. Summary: The Omani Internet message boards "al-Sablah" and "al-Majarra" are the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language fora for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, these popular sites nevertheless offer a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

-- Shooting Incident In Muscat  
-- Royal Decree On Scientific Research Council  
-- Newspaper Interview With Yusuf bin Alawi

End summary.

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Shades Of Columbine  
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2. On June 27, a disgruntled former teacher of Islamic studies entered a branch office of the Ministry of Education and shot several former supervisors and colleagues before eventually committing suicide (see reftel). Al-Sablah members expressed shock at this incident, and offered condolences to the victims' families. One writer feared, "This is a horrible event that will have serious consequences in our society and will change a lot of things." Similarly, others warned that the shooting may be a grim harbinger of future trends in Oman, saying "The slowness of administrative courts to act upon certain cases may well provoke citizens to take matters into their own hands, however violently."

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They Blinded Me With Science  
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3. Although there is hardly ever a consensus among al-Sablah contributors, there was universal acclaim for the recent royal decree establishing a "Scientific Research Council" made up of prominent government and academic officials, with a stated goal to promote research through an integrated national plan. "This decree shows the importance of scientific thinking, and the Sultan wants Oman to be a leader in the technological development of our era," observed one respondent. Another claimed, "It is good that the council includes individuals from educational institutions, and not just ministry people."

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Praise For The Minister  
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4. The Doha-based "al-Bayan" newspaper published a full-page interview with Oman's Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi on June 27. Many topics were raised during the interview, including the Sultan's recent pardoning of Ibadhi Muslims convicted of belonging to a secret organization and seeking to overthrow the government. Al-Sablah members quickly seized on several of the minister's responses, in which - according to the newspaper - he stated that the organization had not been established to overthrow the government, but rather to protect the teaching of Ibadhism.

5. One contributor asked, "If an official like Yusuf bin Alawi says that the organization did not intend to overthrow the government, than why did the media and the internal security services make that accusation? Why are there contradictions between the statements of government officials?" Another author complained, "Why is he mentioning the Ibadhis now? Why did he not mention the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood group that was imprisoned ten years ago?" However, most forum members hailed the minister's responses: "Yusuf bin Alawi is a clever and intelligent diplomat.... He was one of the few people in whom Sultan Qaboos placed his trust to lead Oman's foreign policy since the 1970s."

BALTIMORE